

Most Ardently by hopphorn

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Summary:

Mr. Steve Harrington professes his love for Billy Hargrove. In the rain. In a gazebo.

Most Ardently

Author's Note:

- For [ohmybgosh](#).

It's literally the same scene. I just...put our boys in it?
I dunno.

Billy is drenched after running from the church in the rain. In that quiet, terrible building he had thought was going to go mad with fury. Mr. Harrington was responsible for separating Maxine from Mr. Sinclair. He'd intentionally ripped Sinclair from Netherfield Park and dashed Maxine's hopes in the process. In his mind, all he can picture is the way Maxine's face had fallen when she'd read Emily's letter, knowing Sinclair was leaving for good.

From the corner of his eye, something moves and he whirls, breath catching in his throat.

The man himself, Steven Harrington, stands just inside the gazebo in which Billy has taken shelter. His hair is dripping from the rain, ringlets of water running down his cheeks as he pants. He must have watched Billy leave and had given chase.

"Mr. Hargrove." He starts and takes a step forward but Billy takes a step back, swallowing the anger and hurt that clamors in his chest. "I have struggled in vain and can bear it no longer. These past months have been a torment. I came to Rosings with the single object of seeing you, I had to see you." Billy blinks, his mind suddenly going blank as he tries to comprehend the words spilling rapidly from Harrington's lips. "I have fought against my better judgement, my family's expectation, the inferiority of your birth, my rank and circumstance and I'm willing put them aside and ask you to end my agony."

There isn't enough air as Billy breathes, eyes wide in shock. Harrington pants, taking a cautionary step forward.

Billy takes another back.

"I don't understand." He murmurs, heart racing. He truly doesn't. Harrington was a proud snob, someone he had fantasized about punching in the jaw only moments ago. Now his pulse is going wild in his neck, his hands trembling.

"I love you." Harrington blurts. Billy can't hear himself think over the rain as he stares, aghast. "Most ardently." The man continues, his gaze drawn to Billy's mouth before he's finding his eyes again. There's a *hunger* in Harrington's stare and Billy is shocked he's never seen it before. Amazed that it appears so readily now. "Please do me the honour of accepting my hand."

He wants to marry me. Billy swallows and gathers the thoughts that continue to tumble around in his head. With as much composure as his surprise can allow, he speaks.

"Sir, I appreciate the struggle you have been through, and I am very sorry to have caused you pain." The tone of his voice turns sour when he recalls his reasons for disliking Steven Harrington. As his anger leeches into his voice, he adds, "Believe me, it was unconsciously done."

A clap of thunder fills the silence and Harrington's brow furrows, as if he hadn't comprehended an outcome where Billy rejects him.

"Is this your reply?" He asks in a clipped tone. Billy lifts his chin.

"Yes, sir." He nearly hisses.

"Are you laughing at me?" Harrington takes another step. This time, Billy doesn't budge. Anger holds him steady, fills him with confidence.

"No." Billy growls.

"Are you rejecting me?" Harrington's eyes go narrow and Billy smirks, giving a dry laugh before he replies.

"I'm sure that the feelings which you've told me had hindered your regard will help you in overcoming it." He plans to turn and walk away when Harrington moves closer, eyes heated.

"Might I ask why with so little endeavor of civility I am thus repulsed?"

"And I might as well inquire why with so evident a design of insulting me that you chose to tell me that you liked me against your better judgement?"

Billy sees the regret cross Harrington's features, the crease of his brow.

"No believe me—"

He cuts him off, words tumbling from him steadily.

"If I was uncivil, then that is some excuse. But I have other reasons. You know I have."

"What reasons?" The frown on Harrington's face is deep and Billy shakes his head, amazed. He truly doesn't know what could stop someone of Billy's rank from accepting his *gracious* proposal? After everything that has occurred between them, after every slight? A tidal wave of offenses rises in his throat like bile.

"Do you think anything might tempt me to accept the man who has ruined, perhaps forever, the happiness of a most beloved sister? Do you deny it, Mr. Harrington? That you separated a young couple who loved each other, exposing your friend to the censure of the world for caprice and my sister to its derision for disappointed hopes, and involving them both in misery of the acutest kind?"

Harrington lifts his chin, his unmistakable pride easing his form.

"I do not deny it."

"How could you do it?" Billy hisses, shaking his head.

"Because I believed your sister indifferent to him." Harrington says with an air of authority. The audacity amazes Billy and he scoffs.

"Indifferent?"

"I watched them, most carefully, and realised his attachment was

deeper than hers." Harrington insists.

"That's because she's shy!" Billy shouts, his voice ringing back to him inside the stone gazebo. Harrington's volume rises to match his own.

"Sinclair too is modest and was persuaded she didn't feel strongly."

"Because you suggested it." Billy shoots back. The space between them narrows further when Harrington leans in, anger tightening his face.

"I did it for his own good." He snaps. Billy unravels.

"My sister hardly shows her true feelings to me!" He exclaims.

A crack of thunder makes them both ease back on their heels, startling from their focus. Billy realizes he's panting, the conversation as fierce as a duel. When he speaks again, he attempts to leverage his composure and uses a civil tone.

"I suppose you suspected that his fortune had some bearing on the matter?"

Harrington shakes his head, wrinkling his nose a little in a look of disgust.

"No! I wouldn't do your sister the dishonour." His body language suddenly becomes hesitant, like he isn't quite sure if he can continue. He does. "Though it was suggested..."

"What was?" Billy interjects, stepping in to challenge him.

"It was made perfectly clear an advantageous marriage..."

Billy jumps all over him, his voice like acid.

"Did my sister give that impression?"

Harrington looks offended when he frowns back at him and shakes his head.

"No! No. There was, however, I have to admit the matter of your

family..."

"Our want of connection? Mr. Sinclair didn't seem to vex himself about that—" Billy remembers the way Sinclair had gazed upon his sister like she was a treasure the moment they'd been introduced. There had been no hesitation on account of Maxine's status. None whatsoever.

"No, it was more than that." Harrington clarifies, biting a lip.

"How, sir?" Billy growls. Harrington colors and moves closer, voice booming when he replies.

"It was the lack of propriety shown by your father and even, on occasion, your step-mother." A clap of thunder rolls across the sky and Billy swallows as shame heats his belly. His father, yes. His father had made his intentions of selling Maxine off to the highest bidder well known. Sinclair had been a favored suitor and his father had once proclaimed to rejoice in his *winning* a superior son. The comment had burned Billy before but now it scalds as he faces it again. Harrington seems to balk at Billy's silence and he breathes, calming, before he continues. "Forgive me. You and your sister I must exclude from this."

Billy feels his anger rise again at the mention of Maxine and he presses forward, looking directly into Harrington's eyes.

"And what about Thomas?"

Harrington also advances until Billy can see the raindrops on his cheeks, the water in his lashes.

"Thomas?" He growls low, his voice almost tangible on Billy's skin.

"What excuse can you give for your behaviour towards him?" Billy asks, wrinkling his nose in distaste. But there is nothing foul about Harrington now. In fact, upon further study there is only the contrary. His skin is pale and smooth and his eyes a rich hue like sweet chocolate.

"You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns?" Harrington arches a brow in irritation and Billy hums at the conflict, relishes the

frank confrontation he'd never previously been allowed.

"He told me of his misfortunes." He hisses. By the time he'd met Thomas, Billy had already been set in his opinion of Steve Harrington, but the man's tale had only deepened Billy's disregard. When Harrington leans closer, anger rises in his pink cheeks; Billy doesn't step away.

"Oh, yes his misfortunes have been very great indeed." He gruffs. Billy scoffs.

"You ruin his chances and yet you treat him with sarcasm." Typical of a wealthy man with no financial burdens. Billy examines Harrington's face, aware that his words are not his place. He has no right to interfere in the private affairs of two gentleman but his compassion for the downtrodden is unchecked. He feels genuine sympathy towards Thomas and Harrington's dismissal only stokes the flames in Billy's belly. He's furious, his heart speeding until his pulse is a dull throb in his ears.

"So this is your opinion of me?" Harrington finally mutters, his breath fanning over Billy's face. It's cool and sweet, like the tea and jam from breakfast. "Thank you for explaining it so fully. Perhaps these offences might have been overlooked had not your pride been hurt by my honesty in admitting scruples about our relationship. Did you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your circumstances?"

Billy's composure breaks and he moves flush to Harrington's chest, his face within inches as he *seethes* with fury and hurt. Words fly freely from his lips as Harrington watches, his brow lifting with shock.

"And those are the words of a gentleman." Billy mocks, baring his teeth as he snaps. "From the first moment I met you, your arrogance and conceit, your selfish disdain for the feelings of others made me realise that you were the last man in the world I could ever be prevailed upon to marry."

Harrington's eyes hold him there in silence and slowly Billy realizes he's gripped the man's elbow in his passion. Seconds drip like raindrops as they simply breathe. A warmth starts to grow in Billy's

face, different from the bloom of anger that now fades from his veins. No, the heat in his blood flutters like a wings in his stomach, tickles the surface of his skin when he *blushes* .

His lips part. Harrington stares at his mouth, pupils growing wide as he sweeps his gaze back to Billy's eyes. He wants to kiss him. The temptation is there, like a flavor on his tongue.

When Harrington steps away, Billy's heart all but stops.

"Forgive me, sir, for taking up so much of your time." Harrington whispers. And then he's gone, retreating back into the downpour while Billy stands frozen. He watches, mind reeling as he reaches up to touch his lips.

His hands are cold. His mouth is warm.